

*The holy Agency of God, and the Duty of
Man in Affliction.*

A SERMON,

PREACHED

AT PEMBROKE, NEW-HAMPSHIRE,

AT

THE FUNERAL

OF

MRS. MARTHA BURNHAM,

LATE CONSORT OF THE

REV. ABRAHAM BURNHAM,

PASTOR OF THE CHURCH IN PEMBROKE,

OCTOBER. 2, 1815.

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“Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord, from henceforth.”
A Voice from Heaven.

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Sermon.

PSALM LXXXVIII, 18.

Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness.

THIS Psalm appears to have been written in a time of great affliction. The Psalmist goes to God, and pours out all his grief into his bosom, and tells him all his troubles, confessing the hand of God in them, and humbly imploring relief. "O Lord God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before thee. Let my prayer come before thee: incline thine ear unto my cry; for my soul is full of troubles." The troubles which he mentions were gloomy apprehensions of his own approaching death, and the loss of some near and dear friends by death, while he felt destitute of the special tokens of Divine grace and mercy, and the comfortable presence of God. These things unitedly pressed upon his mind, and bore him down like an insupportable burden. "My life draweth nigh unto the grave, I am counted with them that go down into the pit: I am as a man that hath no strength. Shall thy loving kindness be declared in the grave? or thy faithfulness in destruction? Shall thy wonders be known in the dark? and thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? But unto thee have I cried, O Lord; and in the morning shall my prayer prevent thee. Lord, why castest thou off my soul? Why hidest thou thy face from me?"

While I suffer thy terrors, I am distracted. *Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness.*"

In attending to this subject, I shall shew,

I. That when lover and friend are taken from us by death, it is God who takes them away.

II. That God has a right to take them away.

III. How we ought to feel and conduct towards God under his dealings with us.

IV. How we ought to feel and conduct towards ourselves under these trials.

I am to shew,

I. That when our friends are taken from us by death, it is God who takes them away.

This is a truth which none pretend to deny, but is freely acknowledged by all; yet it is in many cases with but very little sense or consideration of what they say. How many talk as if they did not believe that every death is the effect of Divine agency? Such an one, say they, died by an unhappy accident: such an one, by bad management of physicians: such an one, by the sword of civil justice: and such an one, by the hand of a murderer. Hence men seem to acknowledge the means and instruments of death, but neglect to acknowledge the great over-ruling Agent, and efficient Cause of every death.

It is as much impossible that any one should die without the agency of God, as it is impossible that such an one should come into life without the agency of God. No means or instruments can effect the death of a single creature without the agency of God, any more than those instruments and means could create an individual without the agency of God. It takes as great power to kill,

as it does to make alive. When Jesus stood before the bar of Pilate, Pilate said unto him, "Knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and power to release thee? Jesus saith unto him, Thou couldest have *no power at all* against me, except it were given thee from above." This might be as truly said of every mean and every instrument of man's death. They could have no power to effect it, except it were given them from above. God could never have given existence and life to such an important being as man, without having some important design in it; and that design he must accomplish, or else be disappointed: but God cannot be disappointed; therefore every human being must continue in life, till God's design in giving life is answered; and then will be the time of that creature's death.

God will glorify himself in the life and in the death of every son and daughter of Adam; and will glorify himself in them to all eternity. He will continue every individual in life, just so long as will be for his own glory, and no longer. The great work of man's life appears to be the forming of a character for another state beyond the grave; and God will keep every creature here, till his appointed character be formed; and then he will take away his life: and until then, nothing can take away life, though ever so destructive in its nature: neither the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor the destruction that wasteth at noon day; neither the bow, nor battle-axe, nor savage beast, nor devouring elements, have power to kill, till they are commissioned by Him, who gives life, preserves it, and takes it away. Thus Jonah lived three days and three

nights in the belly of the fish ; Daniel continued all night in the den of hungry lions ; and the three friends lived in the midst of the fiery furnace, though seven times hotter than it was wont to be heated : because neither Jonah, nor Daniel, nor the three friends, had yet finished their characters, nor come to the time wherein God had appointed that they should die.

Job, speaking of God, says, “ in whose hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind : all the days of my appointed time will I wait till my change come.” God hath appointed the day, and the means, and the place, and the manner, of every man’s death. Job saith again, “ Man that is born of a woman, is of few days and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down ; he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not. His days are determined, the number of his months are with thee : thou hast appointed his bounds, that he cannot pass.” Thus the bounds of every individual are set, over which he cannot pass. God challengeth this as his right, as the only living God. “ See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me : I kill, and I make alive ; I wound, and I heal ; neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand.” Again, “ The Lord killeth, and maketh alive ; he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up.” Thus every man’s life and death are entirely in the hand, and at the disposal of God. And let the time, and place, and means, and instruments, be what they may, still it is God, and God alone, who kills and makes alive, who wounds and heals again, and none can deliver out of his hand.

I am to shew,

II. That God has a right to take from us lover and friend.

God's own glory was his ultimate end in making all things. The Scriptures declare, that "he hath made all things for himself; and for his pleasure they are and were created." This, then, was his great end in giving life and being to men; and, as their Maker, he has a right to make every son and daughter of Adam answer this end in the best possible manner. In order for this, he has a right to take away the life of every individual when he pleases. However trying these things may be to friends and relatives; however affecting and distressing; it alters not the right of God. He formed all these tender connexions; and when it will be for the best good of his moral system, or the most for his own glory, he has a right to part asunder those connexions, and remove our dearest friends into darkness, and to the land of forgetfulness. And we see it is God's holy purpose that mankind should die at different ages, under different circumstances, and in different conditions, from the infant in the bosom of its mother, down to extreme old age; thus teaching us, that persons of every age and condition are liable to immediate death.

What gives God this right to take away life, is,

I. That he hath made all men: and the Creator claims a right over the creature. He gave life, and may he not take it away? "Shall the thing formed say unto him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?" May he not do what he will with his own?

2. God always takes away life in infinite wisdom. He is as wise in taking away as in giving life. He always takes away in the best time, and under the best circumstances. He knows when it is best that men should die.

3. He takes away life according to perfect goodness. God is infinitely well disposed towards the work of his hands. He is disposed to do good, and his tender mercies are over all his works.

4. He removes lover and friend from us in perfect justice. If death be an evil, we all deserve it. Those who die, deserve to die; and those who live, deserve the trial and disappointment. "By one man, sin entered into the world, and death by sin; so death hath passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.—Death is the wages of sin."

I am to shew,

III. How we ought to feel and conduct towards God, when he takes our friends from us.

1. We ought to feel and acknowledge his right. We ought to acknowledge the truth, and give to every being his right: but above all things to give God his right; for his right is original. Creatures have no right but a relative right. But God is Lord and Proprietor of all. This we ought to feel, and most heartily acknowledge.

2. We ought to feel satisfied when God takes his right. Thus Job felt when he said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. What! Shall we receive good at the hand of the Lord, and shall we not receive evil?" Thus the Shunamite

felt, when she said, in reference to the death of her only son, "*It is well.*" And so felt good old Eli, when he exclaimed, in reference to the most tremendous affliction, "It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good." The voice of God to us under bereavements, is, "Be still, and know that I am God." We must kiss the rod, and him that hath appointed it. We must acquaint ourselves with him, and be at peace, that thereby good may come unto our souls.

We ought humbly to adore the holy hand of God. *He is the Judge of all the earth, who does the thing that is right.* He has done it, in wisdom, justice, and goodness. He has done what was best; therefore it becomes us to say, *Blessed and adored be his great and holy Name.*

I am to shew,

IV. How we ought to feel and conduct towards ourselves, when God takes from us our dear friends.

When our friends are dead, they are gone beyond our reach, and beyond our assistance; hence we ought immediately to pay a strict attention to ourselves, and see that we lose not the advantage which may be derived from afflictions.

I. We ought to consider ourselves as dying creatures; that our time is hastening on; and that we have a great work to do while life lasts, or never. We are now on probation; after death, cometh the judgment. Therefore we ought to work while the day lasts; for the night cometh when no man can work. We ought not to let our grief take the lead, and call away our

attention from ourselves. Many weep and mourn much for the dead, but none for themselves.

2. We ought to consider ourselves as sinners, and humble ourselves before God. "Remembering mine affliction and my misery," said Jeremiah, "the wormwood and the gall, my soul hath them still in remembrance, and is humbled in me. Wherefore doth a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?" "I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him," said Micah. That is, I will bear any trials and afflictions which he sees fit to lay upon me; for I know that I have sinned, and deserve them. Jeremiah said in his afflictions, "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed." He felt his sins, and felt his ill desert, and how right it would be in God if he should proceed in judgment against him.

3. We ought to confess and forsake our sins, and throw ourselves on Divine mercy. This is our only refuge. To do this without delay, we have the greatest encouragement. "The Lord taketh pleasure in them that fear him, in those that hope in his mercy."

Improvement.

1. Is every death effected by Divine agency, and is it God, and God only, who takes from us lover and friend? Then how exceedingly wicked is it, not to be moved at such times with a sense of our afflictions, and of the hand of God in them! What blindness! What infidelity! What heathenism! What brutal stupidity, yea, more than brutal stupidity! The brutes will mourn over their dead; shall man be more brutal?

2. This subject may teach us a suitable behavior when God is threatening us with the loss of friends. It depends on God, and on him alone, whether they shall be taken from us or not. We ought not then to indulge a distracting anxiety. We ought not to fly to every creature for help, as though man could save. "None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him." We ought to use all prudent means to preserve life and health, and then leave the event with God. We should betake ourselves to him, who is the great Fountain of life, and who holds the keys of death. And as he shews us his will, we should see to it that we are prepared to meet it. It is awfully criminal to withhold what God demands. It will make a deep and sore wound, when God tears from men that which they are unwilling to let go. God is the efficient cause of sickness, as well as of death. He must be acknowledged in it.

3. Every death must have an important effect upon every surviving friend. God works not in vain. It will soften or harden; it will be a favor of life unto life, or a favor of death unto death. It will not leave men as it finds them.

It is sometimes practised, on occasions like this, to give the character, and pronounce a panegyric on the dead. But nothing very particular of this nature will be expected on this occasion, when it is known, that the speaker is almost a total stranger as to any personal acquaintance with the deceased. But thus much can he say, she was of a comely form, of easy and handsome address, and promised much comfort and assistance to her partner and his little daughters. She had a good

education; and such abilities, affable manners, and piety, as recommended her to the friendly notice and high respect of her acquaintance, and eminently qualified her to discharge, with honor and usefulness, the duties of that important sphere, wherein it was fondly hoped she would have been permitted long to move.—She joined the church in her native place, and, so far as our knowledge extends, lived like a Christian, commending herself to every man's conscience in the sight of God; and we have good reason to believe she died in the faith and hope of the Gospel, and has entered into the joys of her Lord.*

* *From information received since the above was written, it is here added, that within the last two years of Mrs. Burnham's life, she experienced a great change in her religious opinions and feelings. She was a professor of religion, and probably a subject of grace, before; yet, in view of the doctrines of Grace, her mind was dark and confused, and at times much perplexed. At length, by the influence of the Holy Spirit, she perceived the truth and consistency, and felt the power and comfort, of those doctrines. She became a decided believer in the real Deity and Atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the entire depravity of human nature, the necessity of regeneration by the power of the Holy Ghost, and in all the other doctrines of the Gospel inseparably connected with these. She deeply lamented her past conformity to the fashionable world; and from a rational professor of Christianity, became a spiritual, engaged, and solemn Christian. She took a lively interest in revivals of religion. Reports of them were to her soul glad tidings of great joy.—During the last summer of her single life, Mrs. Burnham taught a school in Pembroke. In this situation, her amiable disposition, popular talents, and ardent piety, were very conspicuous. Sensible of the high responsibility attached to her office, she daily opened and closed her school by prayer. By her conciliating manners, and assiduous attention, she won the affection of her pupils, and secured the approbation and respect of their parents.—Soon after her connexion with Mr. Burnham, she was elected to preside in the Pembroke Female Religious Society, which station she filled until her*

This subject addresses itself to the mourners and friends of the deceased, but more especially to the bereaved husband.

Dear Sir, Your trials indeed are great and uncommon; like those of one of the best men of old, they have come in quick and doleful succession. It is almost an unheard of case, that a young man should, in so short a space of time, be called to follow three young lovely companions to the silent grave! and perhaps a quite unheard of case, when we add, that you are left with three young, helpless, motherless daughters! Yes, three times are you called to repeat the mournful language of the text, "LOVER AND FRIEND, LOVER AND FRIEND, LOVER AND FRIEND, *bast thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness.*" We feel that you are trebly entitled to that pity from your friends, which Job so pathetically requested in his troubles: "Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends; for the hand of God hath touched me."

Yes, my dear friend, I think I can, in some measure, enter into your feelings; having so lately been called to drink of the same cup of affliction myself, as you well know; and the token on my arm will remind the stranger that the wound is still fresh, which was made by the death of the wife of my youth. Most gladly

death, greatly to the edification and comfort of the members. In Mrs. Burnham, her husband found a help truly meet for him; and his little bereaved daughters, a most tender, affectionate, and faithful mother. After a life of the finest health, never confined a single day till her last sickness, although she was nearly 26 years of age, Mrs. Burnham died of a nervous affection of only ten days length, leaving an infant daughter which survived its mother but one week.

would I now, were it in my power, apply the healing balm of consolation to your bleeding heart. And what can more effectually sooth your heaving breast, than a lively sense that God has done it, and that he has some great and good and wise designs to answer by it? which, though you know not what they be now; yet that you may be permitted to know hereafter, to your perfect satisfaction and everlasting joy. Can you entertain an hard thought, or let drop a murmuring word, when you reflect that God has united you to three such amiable friends, and taken them all away, leaving behind them such lively hopes that they have all entered into that rest which remaineth for the people of God, where you may again meet them, if you live and die as you ought, and enter into a far more endearing friendship and fellowship in that holy state, "where they neither marry nor are given in marriage; but are as the angels of God." Indulge not the thought, that all these things must be against you. How do we know but that all these things are for you, and shall work together for your everlasting good? You will remember that afflictions are entailed to the people of God. You will now go to the great Fountain of light, and wisdom, and support, and consolation, where you have often directed others to go in their troubles. Cast all your cares upon him, for he careth for his people: and he has promised never to leave them nor forsake them. And you will carry with you your little, helpless, motherless children, and by faith lay them in the arms of his fatherly mercy. He can feed, and nurture, and defend them; and carry them through all the dangers of infancy and

childhood ; and as they increase in stature, he can make them grow in favor both with God and man. Let this be your desire and prayer, that in all things you may feel, and speak, and act, as you ought to do ; that you may adorn religion, and glorify God ; and that you and your people may receive the great advantage, which springs from sanctified afflictions.*

May all the relatives and friends of the deceased receive instruction from this afflictive providence, and be made wise unto salvation.—It is the voice of God to them ; and the meaning is plain. The language of it is, “ *Be ye also ready : for ye know not when the Son of man cometh.*” This providence will not be in vain to any one of them. It will soften or harden them. May it have the happy effect to wean them from this world ; to raise their affections to God ; and to fit them for death, and for a blissful eternity.

The church in this place have met with another serious loss ; and their afflictions keep pace with those of their afflicted Pastor. Let them receive this as an admonition from the great Head of the church ; to watch and be sober, and not to sleep as do others : but to work while it is day ; to do

* *Mr. Burnham's uncommon bereavements are thought worthy of being presented in a connected view. He was married to Miss Ann Perly, of Dunbarton, New-Hampshire, May 16, 1808, who died December 28, of the same year ; to Miss Mary Galse White, of Plaistow, New-Hampshire, January 23, 1810, who died October 18, 1813 ; and to Miss Martha Barnard, of Sterling, Massachusetts, November 15, 1814, and she died September 30, 1815.—Thus he is left a widower the third time within seven years, and his daughters motherless a second time, although one is under three and the other under five years of age. “ Great things doeth He, which we cannot comprehend.”*

with all their might whatever of duty their hands find to do.—How soon was the work of your young sister finished, and her case sealed up forever ! You know not who will be called next, whether old or young. You know not where the next breach will be made. How much does it become you then to be ready, to have your lamps trimmed and burning ! How repeatedly have the hopes and high expectations of the sisters of this church been cut off and blasted ! They have seen three amiable young females placed as it were at their head ; whose talents and piety they viewed as devoted to their use and benefit ; and from whom they expected to receive much assistance, while travelling up out of this wilderness world. But, lo, they all, in quick succession, one after another, have been called from these humble employments of time, to engage in the vast scenes of eternity. God's thoughts are not as our thoughts, nor his ways as our ways. *Ye daughters of Jerusalem*, I make no doubt but that your loss is felt, and that your grief is deep ; but while you weep for yourselves and for your children, forget not (I know you will not forget) your beloved Pastor, and his motherless children. All the sympathies of your souls will be excited for them ; and your fervent prayers, and friendly aid and assistance, will not be withholden. Has he not mourned, when you have mourned ? and has he not wept, when you have wept ? And will you not now return him like sympathy again ? Will you not do all in your power to support his afflicted soul ?

This subject admonishes all in this assembly, that all of us, who have relatives and friends,

must part with them, or be parted from them, in death : and each of our houses, in their turn, must be converted into houses of mourning. They who have wives must part with them ; and they who have husbands must part with them. Parents must part with their children, and children with their parents. We must all die, because we have all sinned. Death is the wages of sin ; "and there is no discharge in this war." And the only foundation of support and comfort, in view of approaching death, is contained in the Gospel of Christ. There we learn, that there is an atoning Savior, a sin-pardoning God, a peaceful death, a glorious resurrection, and a blissful eternity, for all penitent and believing sinners. Let all this assembly then repent, and believe the Gospel, and all this bliss shall be their own, forever.—
AMEN.

HYMN,

SUNG AT THE CLOSE OF THE FUNERAL SERVICE.

1. Sweet are the joys of social life ;
They move a feeling heart ;
But tender bands must all dissolve ;
Lovers and friends must part.
2. Gone is a friend of two-fold tie,
A mother and a wife ;
How does the living partner mourn !
How gloomy is his life !
3. And see the tender offspring too,
The branches of the vine ;
They languish for their native stock,
And round a father twine.
4. What once a common charge was felt,
Alone the father bears ;
He feels his own and children's loss,
And double are his cares.
5. But God is able to support,
And will impart his grace
To all who put their trust in him,
And humbly seek his face.
6. Our Saviour God will hear our cries ;
In grief we share his love ;
He sees the mourner in distress,
And feels his pity move.
7. To Jesus make your sorrows known,
And banish all your fears ;
His hand shall raise your sinking hopes,
And wipe away your tears.





